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Pattern of conferences

Impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Background

1. In paragraph 34 of resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, on pattern of conferences, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services to the Assembly at its fifty-third session.

2. In paragraph 33 of the same resolution, the General Assembly took note of paragraph 62 of the report of the Committee on Conferences to the Assembly at its fifty-third session (A/53/52). That paragraph recorded that, during the discussion by the Committee at its 1998 substantive session of an item on improved coordination of conference services, it was stated, on the basis of information provided by Secretariat representatives during informal consultations, that no further budget reductions could be borne by conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi.

3. For its part, in its first report on the activities of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions during the fifty-second session of the General Assembly (A/53/7), circulated under agenda items 112 (Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations) and 116 (Administrative and budgetary coordination of the United Nations with the specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency) of the Assembly's fifty-third session, the Advisory Committee touched on the question of resource reductions for conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna.

II. Fluctuation in resource requirements for conference services

4. As shown in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999 (A/52/6/Rev.1, table 27E.1), expenditures from the regular budget for conference services at Headquarters, and the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna for the biennium 1994–1995 totalled $465,373,600. Appropriations for the biennium 1996–1997 amounted to $459,263,200, reflecting a decline of $6,110,400 or 1.3 per cent as compared to earlier expenditures. Resource requirements for the biennium 1998–1999 were estimated, before recosting, at $431,499,100. The reduction of $27,764,100 in the level of resources proposed for the current biennium, as compared to the revised appropriations for the biennium 1996–1997, reflects, in part, the introduction of net budgeting for conference services provided in Vienna to the United

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Nations Industrial Development Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency ($11,213,900) and the transfer of two organizational units out of conference services in New York ($2,496,800). Therefore, the net decrease in appropriated resources for conferences services was $14,053,400 or 3.25 per cent.

5. As regards established staff resources, in the biennium 1994–1995, the staffing tables of conference services at the three duty stations included, in all, 2,192 posts financed from the regular budget (1,017 in the Professional category and above and 1,175 in the General Service and Trades and Crafts categories). In the biennium 1996–1997, the total figure changed to 2,178 posts (the number of posts in the Professional category and above increased to 1,022), while General Service and Trades and Crafts posts declined to 1,156). In the biennium 1998–1999, the total number of posts dropped to 1,793 (880 in the Professional category and above and 913 in the General Service and Trades and Crafts categories). However, this reduction of 385 regular budget posts reflects the transfer of 169 posts in Vienna (77 Professional category and above and 92 General Service and related categories) from the United Nations staffing table, and the redeployment of 13 posts (10 Professional category and above and 3 General Service and related categories), with their functions, out of conference services in New York. The actual decrease in available posts was 203 (55 Professional category and above and 148 General Service and Trades and Crafts categories).

III. Fluctuation in conference-servicing workloads

6. In the biennium 1994–1995, a total of 28,588 meetings were held at the three conference centres (including calendar and non-calendar meetings). In the biennium 1996–1997, the figure rose to 29,092 meetings. The estimate for the biennium 1998–1999 is 28,001 meetings. Translation workloads went from 340,455,000 words in the biennium 1994–1995 to 297,176,000 in 1996–1997 and are estimated at 300,456,000 for the biennium 1998–1999. The output of the printing and reproduction services in New York, Geneva and Vienna was 2,436,441 page impressions in the biennium 1994–1995, 1,787,855 in 1996–1997 and is estimated at 1,717,616 for the current biennium.

IV. Impact of resource reductions

7. In compliance with requests contained in General Assembly resolutions 50/214, of 23 December 1995, and 51/221 B, of 18 December 1996, the Secretary-General submitted two reports (A/C.5/50/57 and Add.1 and A/C.5/51/53), which described the impact of resource reductions and savings measures on the implementation of mandated programmes and activities at that time. The latter report indicated, in paragraph 55, that, as far as conference services were concerned, while there had been no serious disruptions of the work of intergovernmental bodies, services for night meetings had been limited for the most part to meetings of the Security Council, the Fifth Committee and the Committee for Programme and Coordination. The acquisition of computers to provide all translators with workstations had to be delayed, as had the issuance of meeting records in all languages. It also pointed out, in paragraph 11 (e), that delays in the preparation and submission of documents and publications had resulted in delays in editing, translation and reproduction.

8. Only in the availability of services for unscheduled meetings, mainly those of regional and other major groupings of Member States, did the 1996–1997 constraints affect the overall capacity to meet demand. Although a lower demand for such meetings kept the number of requests for services that could not be granted at levels similar to those of previous years, there were many more cases where services could be made available only on dates different from those preferred by the requesting group.

9. Because of the delay in the purchase of computers for translators, enabling them to work on screen, expected reductions in the workloads at the text-processing stage have not materialized to the extent anticipated. The severe constraints imposed by the cash-flow crisis of late 1996 had to be addressed by curtailing the use of temporary assistance, overtime and contractual translation services. With resources devoted on a priority basis to pre-session documents, noticeable delays occurred in the issuance of meeting records.

10. By and large, pre-session documents continued to be issued within the time-frames customary in the past. However, the need to maintain or increase productivity in translation delayed planned reductions in the rate of self-revision to focus more attention on quality, nor was it possible to implement measures aimed at improving timeliness in document issuance by resorting to overtime work in text-processing, reproduction and distribution.

11. Reduced document print runs, which were achieved by curtailing the number of copies printed for internal Secretariat distribution, for secondary requests in meeting rooms and at document stations and for stock, made possible the continued provision of essential services in reproduction and distribution, two areas affected by strict limitations in supplies, staffing levels, temporary assistance and overtime.

12. Improvements in productivity resulting from earlier investments in technology, in addition to adjustments in workflow management and priority setting, combined with a decline in the demand for services, particularly in the volume of material submitted for translation, allowed conference services to cope with the overall workload in 1996–1997, albeit at a certain cost in quality and timeliness.

13. Further managerial and technological improvements, and the expectation that the demand for meetings and documents would not return to the record levels experienced from 1992 to 1995, enabled conference services to propose, at the end of 1997, the abolition of 203 posts, almost all of which had remained vacant throughout most of the biennium in compliance with mandatory vacancy rates.

14. Of the abolished posts, 55 were in the Professional category and above. A large number were P-2 posts in language services, which were of limited use because most language staff are either recruited at the P-3 level or must be promoted to that level after an initial training period. In the General Service and Trades and Crafts categories, where 148 posts were surrendered, the abolitions reflected the continuing decrease in resource requirements for the text-processing area as a result of advances in technology, the increased electronic movement of documents and the reduced workloads in the reproduction and distribution operations. In general, established posts were relinquished where it was estimated that the mandated functions could be performed more cost-efficiently with temporary assistance or through contractual arrangements, either because of fluctuations in workload or because of the availability of qualified freelance staff whose services would cost less than the use of established posts.

15. Efficiency gains have been achieved through various organizational adjustments and technological innovations. For example, while shifts of conference services staff used to be on duty in their workplaces on weekends and holidays, teams are now placed on call, to be alerted by beeper if their presence is required to provide services on an emergency basis. Considerable savings in overtime accrue from this arrangement. Document print runs are kept under tight control, users are asked periodically to review their need for copies in the light of increasing electronic access and secondary requests for hardcopy are met through printing-on-demand from collections archived on optical disk, reducing the need for document stocks. The cost of labour and supplies is thus reduced.

16. Off-site reporting is being introduced in the production of verbatim records. Statements delivered in conference rooms are digitized, compressed and sent electronically in real time to reporters working at their home bases, who draft the records and also return them electronically. This compensates for the impact of staffing reductions in the Verbatim Reporting Service in New York. Conference services at Headquarters and at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna have joined in an effort to develop remote interpretation. If the project is successful, the use of interpretation capacity could be optimized, with the services in the various duty stations supplementing each other and reducing the need for temporary staff and expenses for travel and daily subsistence allowances.

17. Notwithstanding the above, some inadequacies remain. There is insufficient excess interpretation capacity to attend to meetings of regional groups and other major groupings of Member States after all primary users have been covered. Ironically, improved planning and allocation of services by the Secretariat and better utilization of allocated resources by calendar bodies, with the resulting decrease in meeting cancellations, have contributed to this situation. Conference services can no longer compensate for late submission of documents by using overtime work and abundant staff resources for rapid turnover. Although the recent extensive delays in the issuance of summary records have largely been corrected, almost all of these have to be translated contractually, making it harder to ensure consistency and quality. Verbatim records still become backlogged during peak periods. Issuance is thus delayed and simultaneous circulation in all languages cannot be strictly implemented.

18. Conference services hopes to address these situations through further use of technology and adjustments to resource allocations.